DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 999 FL 027 148

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TITLE Sure How Would the (Imminent) Future Ever Be after Becoming the (Recent) Past? Change in the Irish English "Be after V-ing" Construction.
INSTITUTION Tromso Univ. (Norway).
PUB DATE 2002-02-00
NOTE 32p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Diachronic Linguistics; Foreign Countries; *Grammar; Grammatical Acceptability; Irish; Language Patterns; Language Usage; *Tenses (Grammar); Uncommonly Taught Languages; Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *English (Irish); Ireland

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the written use of the "be after V-ing" construction since the reintroduction of English into Ireland. Information comes from publications beginning in 1670, including 193 works by 87 authors providing 1,316 tokens of the construction. Results support Filppula's (1999) view of historical change in the use of this construction in Irish English. The shift from prospective to perfective meanings occurred throughout the 19th century. The diachronic pattern of use that was revealed provides a link between the historical picture of Bliss' (1979) anthology and modern grammatical accounts. The construction has undergone change in a process that has passed through four stages: 17th and 18th centuries ("be after V-ing" carries mainly prospective meanings, referring to future and non-actual states); early 19th century (while use of "be after V-ing" in prospective senses remains strong, half of all occurrences are now perfect); late 19th century (perfective connotations become more common as the use of "be after V-ing" in prospective senses continues to fall); and 20th century (the construction ceases to carry prospective meanings altogether, becoming almost exclusively perfective). The study highlights the value of examining the existing record of written Irish English usage. (Contains 58 references.) (SM)

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SURE HOW WOULD THE (IMMINENT) FUTURE EVER BE AFTER BECOMING THE (RECENT) PAST?

CHANGE IN THE IRISH ENGLISH *BE AFTER V-ING* CONSTRUCTION

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Tromsø
February 2002

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INTRODUCTION

The *be after V-ing* construction of Irish English (hereafter IE)[1] is usually regarded as a perfect tense conveying 'hot-news' meanings, i.e., it refers to situations in the recent or immediate past that may be assumed to be 'news' for addressees (McCawley 1973). By and large, this view is consistent with modern accounts of the construction (e.g., Bliss 1984; Harris 1984a, 1984b; Kallen 1989), although other perfective[2] understandings appear to be gaining greater currency in certain varieties of IE, notably Dublin English (Kallen 1990, 1991). However, it has also been clear, at least since Bliss (1979), that the historical record shows a very different picture, in which many instances cannot be read as perfective, because they obviously refer to future or non-actual events (cf. also discussion in Kallen 1990). There is a tradition of simply dismissing such usages as non-native, rather than trying to explain them in context (e.g., Bartley 1954; Greene 1966; Todd 1999).[3]

Recently, however, Filppula (1999) has suggested that an old meaning with future time-reference gave way to a new one with past time-reference by the first half of the nineteenth century. This is an echo of Kelly's (1989) argument that the earlier IE evidence is consistent with an origin in dialects of England in which *be after V-ing* refers to an action that is about to take place, as exemplified in the *English Dialect Dictionary* (1898:21-22; cf. below, pp.8-9). This is an improvement on outright

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[1] 'Irish English' refers here to all varieties of English spoken in Ireland, north and south; others cited may use 'Hiberno-English' or 'Anglo-Irish' with the same reference.

[2] 'Perfective' is used without the implications of the distinction between 'perfective' and 'perfect' tenses in languages like Russian; it is useful for the current discussion to have an adjectival form.

[3] Hickey's (e.g., 1997:1003f., 2000:100f.) attempt to regard the usages in Bliss' texts as combinations of irrealis and perfective implies equivalence between modern IE *If you don't hurry up, they'll be after leaving by the time you get there* and examples from Bliss (1979:299-300) like *You will be after being damn'd* and *He will not be after hanging his Countrymen*. This, I think, is a misreading of the historical data. While Hickey's modern IE example can be read as equivalent to a Standard English future perfect ('they will have left'), such interpretations of the early examples ('You will have been damn'd' and 'He will not have hanged his countrymen') seem unlikely. It makes more sense to read the early IE examples as having prospective meanings in the sense of Comrie (1976:64), i.e., 'You are going to be damned' and 'He is not going to/is not about to/does not intend to hang his countrymen'.

dismissal or the line that the '[...] discrepancy [...] is difficult to account for' (Kallen 1990:130), but Filppula's account rests nonetheless on only small amounts of data from periods widely separated in time.

The present survey intends to fill in some of the detail in the historical record by studying the use of the *be after V-ing* construction in literary writing since the reintroduction of English into Ireland from the late sixteenth century (for historical outlines of the development of IE, cf. Braidwood 1964; Filppula 1999:4-11; Hickey 1993, 1995:112-113, 1997:975-980; Kallen 1994: 150-174, 1997). Material for this survey is drawn from works published from 1670 onwards, the approximate date of the earliest occurrence recorded in Bliss (1979). The data comes from some 193 works by 87 authors who provide a total of 1316 tokens of the construction. Because the data covers the entire period, it may offer a reliable guide to changing usage over the last 330 years.[4] Only one change will be discussed here, however. This is the shift highlighted by Filppula (1999) that results in *be after V-ing* shedding future meanings and becoming an exclusively perfect tense. Following Comrie (1976), I refer to these meanings as prospective and perfective, respectively.

A PERFECT TENSE?

Commentators on written representations of IE are often sensitive to 'stage Irishisms', i.e., stereotyped usages that are assumed to be inaccurate caricatures of the English spoken by the Irish:

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[4] The most substantial study to date is Kallen's (1989, 1990, 1991) work on spoken Dublin English, which is based on 140 or 114 tokens in different versions. Other work on spoken varieties includes Filppula (1997, 1999), who has recorded 25 or 26 tokens in four localities in south-east and south-west Ireland. Material on northern usage is even less abundant: Harris (1984a) finds 3 instances in the material collected for the Tape-Recorded Survey of Hiberno-English Speech and Kirk (1992, 1997) has 4 examples from the same material, while Corrigan's (1997) study of South Armagh English found just 3 tokens. Fieß (2000) also had just three tokens in her East Galway data. Studies of written IE are treated below.

> [An] Irish construction which has been carried over into Anglo-Irish is that which involves putting *tréis* 'after' before the verbal noun: *tá sé tréis teacht abhaile* 'he is after coming home'; the equivalent in standard English would be the perfect with *just*: 'he has just come home'—it need hardly be said that laboured Hibernicisms like 'will you be after having a drink?' have no basis in the English of Ireland. (Greene 1966:49)

And, in a recent book on the emergence and spread of IE and its influence on other varieties of English, we find the following entry on the abuse of one of the most distinctive syntactic constructions of IE by ignorant writers:

> 'After + verb + ing' is used to indicate a recently performed action:
>
> *I'm after seein him*
>
> means 'I have just seen him'. This parallels the Irish Gaelic, where the means of indicating a recently completed action is carried by a construction that is the equivalent of 'after + verbal noun'. We find this structure used to indicate an Irish speaker in the drama of George Farquhar (1678-1707):
>
> *Do you be after putting the Count in the Closet* [*sic*, - KMcC].
> (*The Beaux Stratagem* [*sic*, - KMcC], 1707)
>
> Farquhar does not get the usage quite right in that his Irish character implies the future, not the recent past. It is possible, however, that Farquhar was using a stage Irishism, already well known when he wrote *The Beaux Stratagem* [*sic*, - KMcC], because he himself was Irish and was reputed to have fought, as a boy, at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690! (Todd 1999:94-95)

The meaning of the construction, its origins in Irish Gaelic, and its misuses, have usually been assumed to be as presented by Greene and Todd[5] (other modern overviews that take the same view on meaning and origins include: Bliss 1984; Filppula 1993, 1997a, 1997b; Harris 1984a, 1984b, 1991, 1993; Hickey 1982, 1997; Kallen 1994; Thomas 1996; Todd 1989:43).

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[5] However, the wider context of Farquhar's usage shows that Todd's example is more likely to be an imperative than an instance of future time-reference:

> Do you be after putting the Count in the Closhet; and leave the Shins wid themselves—I will come with the Count to instruct you in your Chamber. (*The beaux' stratagem*, 1707, LOL)

Be after V-ing has been regarded as a perfect tense at least since Hume's (1878:25) suggestion that it denoted completion of an action. Other early commentators have stressed both completion and recency (e.g., Burke 1896; Hayden and Hartog 1909; Joyce 1910; van Hamel 1912; Younge 1923-24), and these readings have informed subsequent writers down to the present day (e.g., Taniguchi 1956:55; Henry 1957:64, 1958; Goeke and Kornelius 1976; Bliss 1984:144; Harris 1984a, 1984b; L. Milroy 1984, 1987). This view is also supported by a number of dictionaries of IE (e.g., Traynor 1953:2-3; Fenton 1995:51; Macafee 1996:3; Dolan 1999:3-4). The construction has become widely known as the 'hot-news perfect' (cf. e.g., Harris 1984a:304, 1991:201, 1993:160-162).

Recent findings to the effect that in spoken Dublin English *be after V-ing* is no longer a hot-news perfect, referring narrowly to recent events or states (Kallen 1989, 1990, 1991), show the construction to have taken on a broader range of perfective connotations in some varieties of contemporary IE.[6] In this respect, it is becoming more similar to the perfect tense in Standard English and other varieties, which, in addition

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[6] The 'hot-news' label has been adopted from McCawley's (1973) discussion of the various uses of the English perfect. It has been used of the *be after V-ing* construction at least since Harris (1984a:308). Modern accounts of the perfect in IE rely heavily on McCawley's model, which is an attempt to make sense of what he saw as the semantic ambiguity of the English present perfect. McCawley's account has been particularly useful in IE studies, because all of the distinct uses identified could be viewed as mapping directly onto different surface realisations of the perfect in IE. The four distinct uses listed by McCawley (1973:263) are given below, with a fifth distinction being drawn between transitive and intransitive verbs in the case of resultative perfects; however, the terminology used here is that of Harris (e.g., 1984a:308, 1991:201), which is more widely accepted in the literature on IE:

> a. **extended now**: I know his family all me life
> b. **indefinite anterior**: I never saw a gun in my life nor never saw a gun fired
> c. **resultative**: I've it pronounced wrong (transitive); I went back to school and all but I'm not long left (intransitive)
> d. **hot-news**: A young man's only after getting shot out there. (Harris 1991:202)

The projection of McCawley's model onto these realisations of the perfect tense in IE implies a strong grammaticalisation hypothesis that holds that the Standard English perfect with *have + past participle* is avoided in conservative IE, north and south, and that speakers of more conservative or non-standard varieties of IE instead use the constructions listed above, apparently keeping their meanings strictly apart. Kallen's (1989, 1990, 1991) studies of Dublin speech make it clear that this hypothesis is incorrect in relation to *be after V-ing*, which can occur in all four of McCawley's senses.

to completed action, whether recent or not, also implies some form of 'current relevance' of the situations referred to.[7]

So far, things seem fairly straightforward: *be after V-ing* is in present-day IE regarded as a form of the perfect tense that typically refers to situations in the recent past. It may currently be taking on other meanings as well, but nonetheless remains a perfect tense. Consequently, usages that are clearly non-perfect are at best anomalous, at worst simply wrong. The fact that twentieth-century usage is exclusively perfective may help to explain why this view is so common.

Table 1. Existing studies of *be after V-ing* in written IE

Study	Tokens	Approx. date	Genre
Bliss 1979	21	1670-1740	literary
Filppula 1997, 1999	4	1800s	letters
Filppula 1999	6	1800s	literary
TOTAL	31		

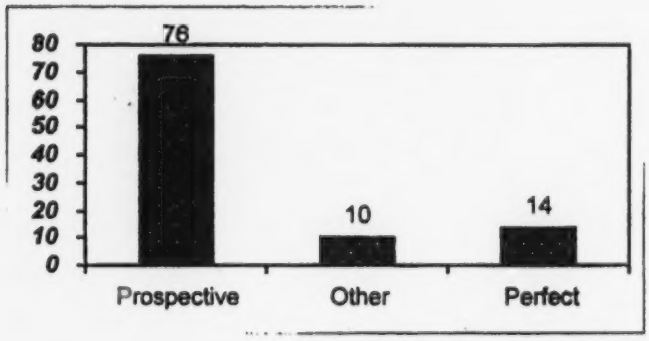
HISTORICAL VIEWS

Problems soon arise, however, when we start looking at the history of the construction, for the written record makes it obvious that it has not always been used with past time-reference. But the use of *be after V-ing* in

[7] In a recent book on aspect and past-time reference, Michaelis does not subscribe to the view that the four understandings of the perfect tense listed in fn. 2 can, or should, be kept apart: '[...] the hot-news perfect simply represents a common use of resultative perfect: one in which the causal event denoted by the participial complement is a recent one' (Michaelis 1998:157). Similarly, Brinton (1988:10-12) sees both the indefinite anterior (his term is 'existential') and hot-news senses as subcategories of the resultative. However, it is useful in accounts of IE to retain hot-news as a distinct meaning, since it has psychological reality for many speakers of this variety, and may be realised in the grammaticalised form of the *be after V-ing* construction with precisely that understanding. Examination of the corpus on which the present survey is based also indicates that the general perfect readings found by Kallen (1989, 1990, 1991) in Dublin may be typical only of that city and the south-east of the island. Writers from the north and west show a very marked tendency to use *be after V-ing* with hot-news connotations only. Finally, all four senses identified by McCawley (1973) have also been part of syntactic accounts of the treatment of the perfect in IE for some time.

writing has been investigated in just three studies to date; these are listed in Table 1. The earliest period is represented by the extracts from historical texts contained in Bliss' (1979) anthology of representations of spoken IE, while Filppula has examined nineteenth-century emigrant letters (1997:237-238, 1999:100-101, 302fn) as well as considering examples from some nineteenth-century literary writing (1999:104-105). The data for these studies amounts to a total of just 31 examples, of which 21 are from the period 1600-1740 and 10 from the nineteenth century (approx. 1830-1900).

Figure 1. *Be after V-ing*: usage in Bliss' (1979) texts, 1670-1740 (n=21)



Bliss' (1979) anthology shows *be after V-ing* occurring mostly with a future modal or referring to non-actual situations, rather than being a perfect tense (cf. also discussion of the same in, e.g., Kallen 1990:127-131; Filppula 1999:102ff.). Figure 1 shows the distribution in Bliss' texts of prospective, other and perfective meanings. Only three of his examples represent perfective usage (Bliss 1979:300); the bulk of the sentences are prospective. Bliss notes that the typical reaction to this observation is that:

> Such usages have generally been ridiculed as due to the ignorance of English writers, who have not the sense to understand the construction as used by Irishmen [see, for instance, Bartley (1954) 130; Greene (1966) 49]; but not all the

> writers [i.e., in this collection, - KMcC] are English, and in other respects they reflect Hiberno-English usage with such accuracy that it seems more profitable to accept their evidence as trustworthy and to seek an explanation for it. (Bliss 1979:300)

In other words, the general strategy—of which Bliss himself was critical—has been to deny the validity of the existing data for the early period, as do Greene and Todd (cf. pp.3-4, above).

Filppula (1999:102ff.) acknowledges the 'stage Irishism' argument, suggesting that the way this construction is used in older literary writing may have been a conventional means of indicating Irishness by means of a recognisable, stereotyped (but ultimately misinterpreted?) feature of Irish speech. However, more importantly, Filppula also allows that there seems to be an 'old' *after* construction with future reference and a 'new' one that is a perfect tense (1999:102-105). This is the line I want to pursue in the following analysis of data on *be after V-ing* from 1670-2000.

OLD AND NEW MEANINGS: PROSPECTIVE TO PERFECTIVE

Filppula's (1999:99ff.) study is interesting because it holds out the prospect of a historical account of the development of *be after V-ing* from a future into a perfect tense. Such an account may ultimately alter the view of this construction as being the clearest instance of direct grammatical borrowing from Irish Gaelic (for recent statements, cf. Filppula 1997:233; Hickey 1997:1001, 2000:100).

Dialects of Great Britain and beyond

In parts of Great Britain, the construction in question, if ever used at all, has referred to imminent or potential, rather than completed situations, as in (1).

(1) Prospective uses in England and Scotland:

Inverness: I *will be after telling* him [I will tell him].
Chester: *He's after taking* another farm.
East Anglia: The hen *is after laying*.
Suffolk: I now *after fetching* it. (*EDD*:21-22).

Scotland: *I'd be after asking* you to lat me faither off. (*SND* II:216)

Such prospective usage is also reported from other parts of the English-speaking world, as the examples in (2) illustrate.

(2) Prospective uses in North America:

Prince Edward Island, Canada:
What *wud ye be after thinking* if I told ye I'd find a tiny wee new baby there?

Now, run up to yer room, and put off yer finery and we'll get to work. I belave *we're after having* a rainy night av it. The wind's rising and it's dark as a squaw's pocket already.

Grandfather's feet were braced. He was pulling her [a horse] back, holding her until her hind feet were knocking the dashboard. 'I daren't hold her in any more. She'd be after slipping and break a leg'.

(Pratt 1988:4)

West Pennsylvania: The Irishman . . . utterly refused to be after fighting in any such manner.
New Jersey: I fear you'll be after printing too many.
Alabama: He was after savin lost souls and was willin to let other men save the country.
Virginia: That hen is after laying.
West North Carolina: I ain't after botherin' ye . . . I ain't after touchin' ye.
(*DARE*:17)

It is at least likely that early settlers from Great Britain brought this usage with them to Ireland and that it was picked up by those Irish people who acquired English up to the end of the eighteenth century.

Such prospective uses may be reinforced by the inherent properties of *after*. In other Englishes throughout the world, the lexical item *after* has what Kallen calls 'divergent interpretations of its temporal significance' (1990:131). Thus, the examples in (3) show both anterior and prospective meanings of *after*.

(3) The temporal ambiguity of *after*:

a. Anterior:

After the break, we all went back to work.

This book was written after the writer's long illness.

b. Prospective:

Business people are always after more money.

The cops are after you, Charley!

Lucinda is always after the boys.

(adapted from Kallen 1990:131)

In the sentences in (3a), *after* 'fixes a reference point anterior to the primary state of affairs to which reference is made', while: 'Prospective marking is implied in [the examples given in (3b)], in which *after* does not so much indicate temporal anteriority or physical 'following' but a state of desire relative to the future' (Kallen 1990:131).

Assuming that the kinds of usage attested in the *English Dialect Dictionary* (cited above in (1)) are 'entirely unfamiliar in American English', Kallen argues that Americans' interpretation of the IE *be after V-ing* construction as having future time-reference 'must be taken as an interpretive strategy arising from more inherent features of English *after*' (Kallen 1990:131). Hickey claims that 'the use of *after* in the sense of "looking for" is not common in Ireland (although it could conceivably have been) [...]' (1997:1003; cf. also Hickey 2000:100-101). My impression from examination of a large body of Irish writing and a considerable database of spoken IE is that this assumption, for which Hickey offers no evidence, is unlikely to be borne out by empirical work; that, in fact, the use of *after* in the sense of 'looking for' is not at all uncommon in IE, but that its use may be largely restricted to questions or *what*-clauses (e.g., *What are you after now?* and *I know what he's after*); whatever the case, the

matter certainly warrants empirical study. And as we have seen, *DARE* and Pratt's (1988) Newfoundland dictionary both attest prospective uses of *be after V-ing* in North America, as in (2).

Source in Irish Gaelic

But these learners would, of course, have had available to them not only uses like those in (1) and (2), but also a Gaelic-derived model for understanding this construction, by which it was a hot-news perfect. Hickey proposes that the following model was used by Irish speakers searching for categorial equivalence between English and their native Gaelic:

a. Gaelic copula *tá* = English *be*

b. Gaelic *tar éis/i ndiaidh* = English *after*

c. Gaelic verbal noun, e.g., *déanamh* = English present participle, e.g., *doing*

d. Gaelic *Tá siad tar éis an obair a dhéanamh* = English *They're after doing the work*
(adapted from Hickey 1997:991)

The change in IE might then be regarded as the working out of a semantic clash between an English construction with prospective meanings and a perfective understanding based on direct transferance of the corresponding construction in Gaelic. The temporal ambiguity of *after* itself, of course, helps make both senses possible.

Given the length of time it took for English to become the first language of most Irish people—about 250 years, during which bilingualism was extensive, with Gaelic remaining in widespread use and therefore readily available as a model (cf. Hickey 1997:980)—it is perhaps not surprising that the perfective semantics of the Gaelic model would win out in the end:

> The historical picture one is left with is that of a gradual dissemination of English from east to west and from urban centres to rural districts over a period of at least two centuries, from the Cromwellian era in the mid 17th century to the post-Famine period, i. e. to the second half of the 19th century. Such a long period of bilingualism would have furthered the transfer of structure from the outset language to the target one. The use of speech habits and patterns from Irish on an individual level lasted long enough for these to spread to the entire community of Irish speakers of English as general features of their variety of the new language. (Hickey 1997:980)

But since the British settlers and their descendants often maintained contact with Great Britain, and there was a steady influx of landlords, agents, clergy, administrators and soldiers into Ireland, British varieties of English must also have continued to exert an influence, especially in the period before the mass language shift which occurred from the early nineteenth century.[8] In other words, both prospective and perfective readings were available over a very considerable timespan.

Sources in Standard Englishes?

It is, moreover, likely that perfective senses would have been further reinforced by the use of non-finite *after V-ing* in Standard Englishes. In varieties of Standard English, we find *after V-ing* used in non-finite adverbial clauses in which there is very often a strong implication of a relationship of recency or immediacy between the adverbial and finite clauses. Examples from written IE and other Englishes where there is a close (immediate or recent) time relationship between non-finite *after V-ing* and finite clauses are given in (4).

(4) Non-finite *after V-ing* in Standard English:

a. *After receiving* what pay *Briljard* cou'd force himself to bestow upon her; some flatteries of dissembl'd love; and some cold Kisses; which even imagination cou'd not render better, She return'd to her Lady, and he to his

---

[8] De Fréine's (1977:80, 86) estimates give this linguistic profile of nineteenth-century Ireland:

	Irish only	Bilingual	English only
1800	2m (40%)	1.5m (30%)	1.5m (30%)
1900	21 000 (0.6%)	0.48m (16%)	2.5m (83%)

Stratagem, which was to counterfeit a Letter from *Octavia*:... (Aphra Behn, *Love letters between a man and his sister* Part 2, 1685, p.250, LOL)

b. He answered him, therefore, with great Courtesy, as indeed he was of a very good and gentle Disposition; and *after expressing* a civil Surprize at meeting him there, declared himself to be of the same Opinion with regard to the Necessity of human Actions; ... (Henry Fielding, *Amelia*, 1752, p.23, LOL)

c. "Mother," he said, *after eyeing* the little figure before him in silence for some time, ... (Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, 1853, p.24, LOL)

d. He closes the door, and, *after looking* at the Strange Gentleman very steadily, brings a chair down L.H., and sits opposite him. Charles Dickens, *The strange gentleman*, 1885, p.142, LOL)

e. —And, *after blinking* up at the sacred figure, *Not a bloody bit like the man*, says he. (James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922, p.88)

f. The sense of relief they had experienced *after getting* out of Los Angeles and across the border had melted; reality was falling hard on them and the only shelter was in their own silence. (Ronan Bennett, *Overthrown by strangers*, 1992, p.208)

g. 'I came in here at eight o'clock last night,' Al said, '*after hearing* about McGann on the news. ...' (Dermot Bolger, *Father's music*, 1997, p.210)

h. In all likelihood the man in the black leather coat already knew that she was no longer in the complex, and her father's house was the first place he would look *after reaching* that conclusion. (Jean Hanff Korelitz, *A jury of her peers*, 1996, p.400)

It is possible that, as Gaelic speakers adopted English, such non-finite clauses were reanalysed, making them available for finite use, as in *I'm after hearing about McGann on the news*. Native speakers of such a heavily nominal language as Gaelic might be predisposed to do so, and their search for categorial equivalence in their newly-acquired second language would certainly be encouraged by the overlapping uses of the English present participle and the Gaelic verbal noun. Examination of a large body of writing gives the impression that such non-finite clauses with *after V-ing* are very frequent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing. This, then, suggests itself as a further source of *be after V-ing*, because: (a) it is a construction available in the target language for Irish

learners of English; (b) it often carries implications of recency or immediacy; and (c) it has a 'perfect' version in, e.g., *after having heard about McGann on the news.*

From old to new meanings

It is consistent with this account that Filppula dates the shift from the 'old' to the 'new' meaning to the period before 1830, assuming the old meaning to be a relic form after that date:

> [...] although the 'old' *after* construction, whether Stage Irish or not, appears to have become almost obsolete by then [i.e., 1830], occasional examples can be spotted, for instance, in the works of William Carleton, who could hardly be blamed for sustaining mock-Irish usages. (Filppula 1999:104)

But this assumption of 1830 as a likely date for completion of the change rests on comparison of Bliss' texts with only 10 examples from a small body of writing—one unpublished manuscript and one published work each by the novelists John Banim and William Carleton. The unpublished novel provides at least the two examples of the 'old' usage cited in (5).

> (5) 'Old' (prospective) usage:
>
> a. '[. . .] I *will be after curing* the poor baste [beast], sure enough; – but it will take a power of time, before ye's be able to back him.'
>
> b. 'Ogh hone, ogh hone! that's too much for my poor ould heart, it *will be after breaking* outright, so it will, if you be going on at that rate, [. . .]'. (cited in Filppula 1999:104)

Meanwhile, in novels by Carleton and Banim, we find both the 'old' and 'new' uses in (6) and (7).

> (6) 'Old' (prospective) usage by William Carleton:
>
> Jack, by this time, was beginning to think they *might be afther wishing to throw* luck in his way; for he had often heard of men being made up entirely by the

fairies, till there was no end to their wealth. (Carleton 1842-44/1990:26, cited in Filppula 1999:104)

(7) 'New' (perfective) usages by William Carleton and John Banim:

a. "How can any man speed, that comes after you?" says the Friar; "I*'m after travelling* the half of the parish for that poor bag of oats that you see standing against the ditch." (Carleton 1842-44/1990:74, cited in Filppula 1999:105)

b. [. . .] So he suffered, poor fellow, an' died right game, for he said over his *dhrop* [original emphasis – MF] – ha, ha, ha – that he was innocent o' the murder as a child unborn: an' so he was in *one* [original emphasis] sinse, *bein' afther gettin'* absolution [my emphasis – MF]. (Carleton 1842-44/1990:390, cited in Filppula 1999:105)

c. '[. . .] I'm sure of that in the heart within; for you*'re after breakin'* Peery's heart, Peggy Nowlan, [. . .]'. (Banim 1826/1992:86, cited in Filppula 1999:105)

Further evidence of exclusively perfective connotations in later emigrant letters supports the argument that the 'new' meaning had taken over in the early nineteenth century, as shown by the examples in (8), which also include instances of the use of *after* + NP, as in (8b) and (8c):

(8) 'New' (perfective) usages in nineteenth-century letters:

a. Dear Thomas it is with Sorrow I answer your letter I*was just after writing* to your Father Isent the letter on the 23 of March Dear Thomas it is very sad indeed Inever felt so bad in my life I*was just after comming* from the hospital Iwas to see my son he is bad with hip disease [. . .]. (*The Green Papers*, No. 1, 1904; National Library of Ireland MS 11,428, cited in Filppula 1999:100-101)

b. P. William FitzGerald of Barrick Street Tallow received a Passage Ticket from Liverpool to New York No. 3212 Thompson's Black Star Line of Liverpool Packets Which I am Very sorry to say that I am not Able to Imbrace the oppertunity show it your Hon.r I *am after a Heavy fit of Sickness* and Pains remained in my Bones I findy my self Disabled to go this spring [. . .]. (*The Grimshaw Papers*, No. 5, 1864; National Library of Ireland MS 15,784, cited in Filppula 1999:104)

c. We *are after 3 days and 3 nights rain* which fell in torents the same as a cascade. (*The Normile Letters*, No. 13, 1863; quoted from Fitzpatrick 1994:92, cited in Filppula 1999:104)

d. [. . .] *I am after receiving two letters from his son Edward for the first time. (The O'Sullivan Letters*, No. 2, 1872; quoted from Fitzpatrick 1994:184, cited in Filppula 1999:302, fn. 9)

This is convincing. The suggested development passes from a stage when prospective meanings dominated, through a period of variation which is assumed to have largely passed by the 1830s, to a modern stage where the construction is exclusively perfective. It would, however, be interesting to see whether a larger body of material, covering the entire period from the seventeenth century to the present, bears this out.

CHANGE IN THE IE *BE AFTER V-ING* CONSTRUCTION

The data for the present study will be analysed along the lines of Filppula's old/new dichotomy. The 'old' meanings, in which *be after V-ing* typically co-occurs with modals like *will, would, might*, etc., will all be referred to collectively as prospective uses. In doing so, I am following Comrie (1976), who notes of 'prospective aspect'—which contrasts with the 'retrospective' nature of the perfect—that:

> Typical English expressions of prospective meaning are the constructions *to be going to, to be about to, to be on the point of*, as in *the ship is about to sail, the ship is on the point of sailing* — both of which describe the ship's present state relative to some future event, with these constructions an imminently future event — and *the ship is going to sail*, where there is again a present state related to a future event, but here without any implication of imminent futurity. (Comrie 1976:64)

Dictionary entries on *be after V-ing* frequently include this kind of prospective meaning, e.g.: 'to be in the act of; to be on the point of, desirous of, bent on (doing something)' (*OED*II, p.232); similar definitions are found in *Webster 3* (I, p.38), *EDD* (I, p.21), *DARE* (p.17) and Pratt (1988:4). Examination of instances of the 'old' use in (4) and (5) indicates that many of these sentences refer to future events or states that may be either imminent or at a greater remove in future time from the point of speaking. I therefore assume here that the 'old' use is a manifestation of prospective aspect. Further examples are given in (9).

(9) Prospective usage:

a. Art thou in love Joy? by my shoule dou dosht Comitt fornicaation; I vill tell you it is a veniall Sinn, and I *vill be after absolving* you for it : but if dou dosht Comitt Marriage, it is mortall, and dou vilt be damn'd, and bee, fait and trot. (Thomas Shadwell, *The Lancashire witches*, 1681-82)

b. No Body spaake, but day did ferry fell for demshelves, and I *fill be after doing* fell for my shelf. (John Michelburne, *Ireland preserv'd*, 1705)

c. Ay, by my Goship's Hand, can I; dat ish if you *will be after feeing* me well. (Charles Coffey, *The female parson*, 1730)

d. ... but that old lordship looks, and ogles as if he *would be after making court* upon my pratty Miss Laura ... (George Alexander Stephens, *The fair orphan*, 1771)

e. ... and, faith, if every body that wanted a head *would be after coming* to me, by my shoul I should have three halves of the world for my customers. (George Alexander Stephens, *The French flogged*, 1767)

f. "*Would* your honour *be after spaking* a word with Phadrick O'Rourke, the schoolmaster of Rathfinnan?" (Eyre Evans Crowe, *To-day in Ireland*, 1825)

Examples like these are precisely the kind of 'laboured Hibernicisms' which, according to Greene (1966:49; cf. above, p.4), 'have no basis in the English of Ireland'. The data used here indicates just how common they in fact once were in written representations of IE (cf. Table 1, p.19), so that, while such comments are certainly valid for the twentieth century, they have no empirical basis for earlier periods (cf. also Bliss 1979). Such uses contrast with the 'new' (perfective) meaning of the construction in (10).

(10) Perfective usage:

a. Why, friend, my master is *mr. Delamour*, who *is just after coming* from *Paris*, [...]. (John O'Keeffe, *The she gallant*, 1767, LOL)

b. I never could imagine worse music than what you are just after playing. (Gerald Griffin, *Talis qualis, or Tales from the jury room*, 1842)

c. How would it be washed up, and we *after looking* each day for nine days, and a strong wind blowing a while back from the west and south? (John Millington Synge, *Riders to the sea*, 1902)

d. There, *she's afther goin'* without her kid. (Seán O'Casey, *The plough and stars*, 1926)

e. 'Merciful Jesus, help us! He's after saying he's a psychopath escaped from dundrum asylum tonight.' (Dermot Bolger, *Night shift*, 1989)

f. Her son *was after doing* a terrible thing, she could see that. (Joseph O'Connor, *The salesman*, 1998)

Finally, there are some 27 tokens in the material that do not fall into either category, being instances of, e.g., the present tense (11a), infinitival uses (11b), the imperative (11c), or habitual (11d).

(11) Other uses:

a. As to that, my jewel, whether good luck goes with me, or *is after following* me, never heed that; ... (George Alexander Stephens, *The French flogged*, 1767)

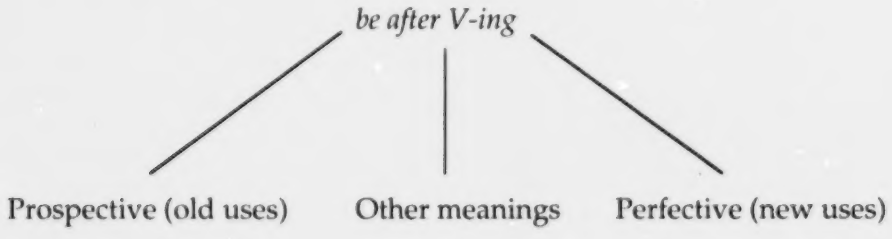
b. Arrah by my shoul, but that *was to put* great horns upon Patrick's head, *and so be after making* him a buck. (George Alexander Stephens, *The fair orphan*, 1771)

c. "Oh, Lucy dear! *don't be after talking* that way o' the country afore my aunt, for it hurts her, and ye must remimber how much she's thought of in the parish?" (Anna Maria Hall, *Sketches of Irish character*, 1829)

d. "... With the blossom comes the bright!—or else, what *do you be after doing* in *her* company?" (Anna Maria Hall, *Lights and shadows of Irish life*, 1838)

Most of these 'other' usages (15/27) occur in the century between 1751 and 1850 (cf. Table 3 and Figure 2, below), which might indicate that this was a period of uncertainty or experimentation. The distinctions with which I operate in the following can be visualised as in (12).

(12) *Be after V-ing*: time reference:



SO HOW WOULD THEY BE AFTER USING THIS CONSTRUCTION?

The writers who provide the 1316 instances of *be after V-ing* studied in this survey can be assumed to be representative of IE literary writing since 1670, the approximate date of the earliest recorded instance (Bliss 1979:118). The results may, therefore, adequately point to changes in IE usage over the last 330 years. Table 3 and Figure 2 show the incidence of prospective, perfective and other uses by 50-year periods.

Table 3. *Be after V-ing*: prospective, perfect and other meanings in IE writing, 1670-2000

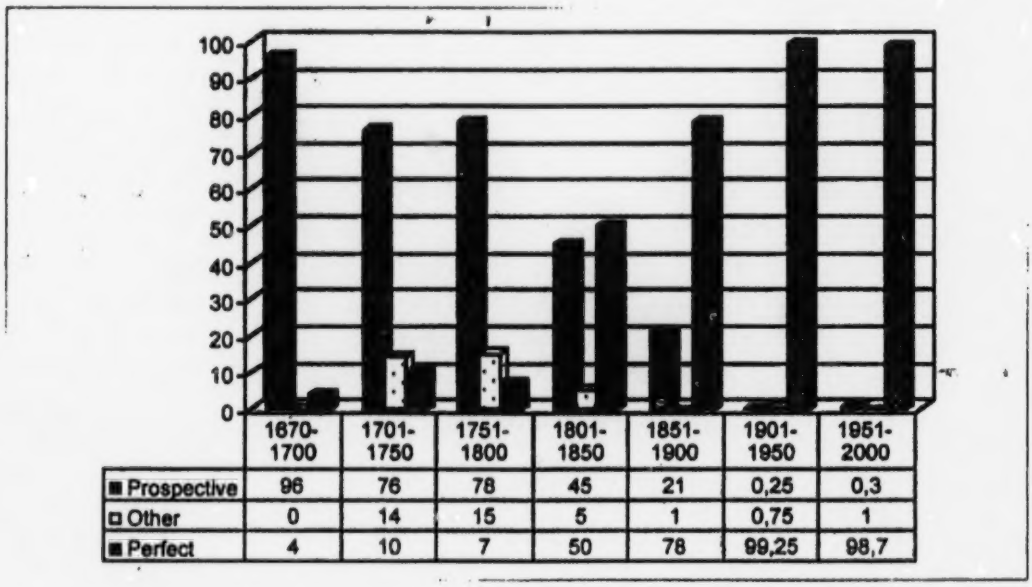
Dates	Pros.	%	Other	%	Perf.	%	Total
1670-1700	23	96	0	0	1	4	24
1701-1750	16	76	3	14	2	10	21
1751-1800	36	78	7	15	3	7	46
1801-1850	72	45	8	5	81	50	161
1851-1900	72	21	3	1	260	78	335
1901-1950	1	0.25	3	0.75	437	99.25	440
1951-2000	1*	0.3	3	1	285	98.7	289
Total	221	17	27	2	1069	81	1316

* Occurs in a 1996 play by Martin McDonagh, both of whose parents are Irish, but who was born and brought up in London, where he lives and works.

Figure 2 shows a clear trend. What we are looking at here is a classic S-curve: very low levels of perfective usage in the early stages, followed by a period of increasing variation, and finally a stage where perfective meanings are the only ones possible for most users. Prospective meanings account for the bulk of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century material as well as considerable proportions of the data for the nineteenth century, but are almost entirely absent after 1900. In the period up to 1800, prospective senses account for the bulk of the

data. But their proportion dwindles to almost zero in the twentieth century, while perfective usage increases throughout the period. In the early nineteenth century, there are equal proportions of perfective and non-perfective senses. While perfective meanings predominate in the latter half of the nineteenth century, one-fifth of all tokens (21%) are still prospective. Only from about 1900 can we safely say that perfective meanings dominate totally.

Figure 2. *Be after V-ing*: prospective, perfect and other meanings, 1670-2000 (%)



	1670-1700	1701-1750	1751-1800	1801-1850	1851-1900	1901-1950	1951-2000
■ Prospective	96	76	78	45	21	0,25	0,3
□ Other	0	14	15	5	1	0,75	1
■ Perfect	4	10	7	50	78	99,25	98,7

The major shift to perfective readings is a nineteenth-century event. The sudden leap in perfective meanings coincides with the large-scale shift from Irish Gaelic to English, which gathered pace in the period from the 1801 Act of Union to the end of the Great Famine in 1850: in 1800, only 30% of the population of the island was monolingual in English; by 1900, 83% were speakers of English only (see fn. 7, above). The semantic clash between prospective and perfective understandings may have been particularly acute for those acquiring English in this

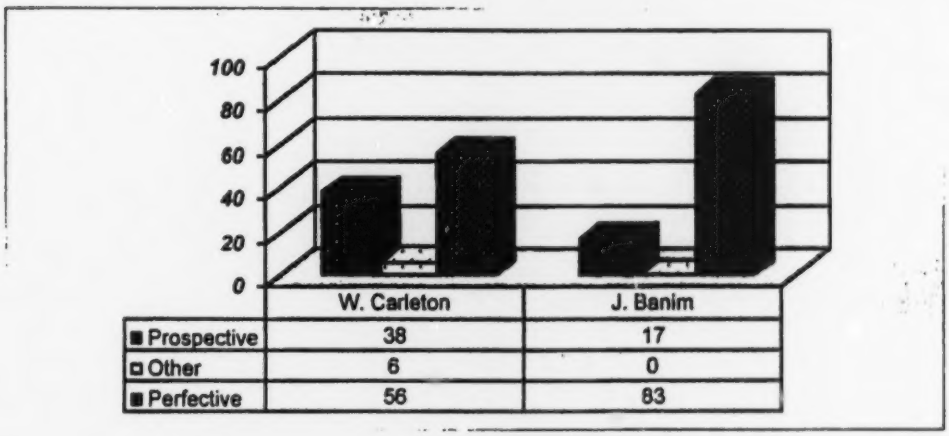
period. The semantics of the Gaelic construction might have provided a sufficiently strong model for the conflict to be resolved by a bilingual population in favour of the Gaelic meaning, especially as this was reinforced by the semantics of the Standard English non-finite *after V-ing* construction, as in (4).

By the turn of the twentieth century, then, *be after V-ing* was a perfect tense, and it is exclusively so for all but a small number of the twentieth-century writers represented here. This survey provides support for the suggested development away from an older prospective understanding towards a new usage which makes the *be after V-ing* construction a perfect-tense form. However, it does not support the assumption that the change to perfective usage was complete by the 1830s-40s (Filppula 1999:104-105). But recall that Filppula looked at only three works by three different writers, while the nineteenth-century material included here covers some 57 works by 21 authors. It may be interesting to look in detail at the usage of his two named writers, William Carleton (1794-1869) and John Banim (1792-1842), whose IE has been regarded as a reliable guide to real language use of the period (cf. Todd 1989:129ff., 1999:133; Filppula 1999:47, 104-105). In all, 10 works by Carleton gave 45 tokens, and 4 books by Banim produced 23.

Figure 3 shows the proportions of each type of usage in works by these two writers. Both vary between prospective and perfective understandings, although the latter are more numerous compared to their prospective scores. In terms of the old and new meanings, however, Banim's usage is more progressive than that of Carleton. The evidence is consistent with these works being produced at a time when change was underway, but had by no means gone to completion: users of IE in the first half of the nineteenth century had available to them two different

semantics for *be after V-ing*, the older prospective meanings and the new perfective senses, and, like Carleton and Banim, many of them used both.

Figure 3. Prospective *versus* perfective uses by 2 nineteenth-century writers



	W. Carleton	J. Banim
■ Prospective	38	17
□ Other	6	0
■ Perfective	56	83

CONCLUSION

This overview of the written use of the *be after V-ing* construction since 1670 gives qualified support to Filppula's view of historical change in the use of this construction in IE. The shift from prospective to perfective meanings occurred over the course of the nineteenth century. The diachronic pattern of use revealed here provides a link between the historical picture of Bliss' (1979) anthology and modern grammatical accounts. The construction has undergone change in a process that has passed through the following stages:

> Stage I (17th and 18th centuries): *be after V-ing* carries mainly prospective meanings, referring to future and non-actual states. The origins of this usage may lie in the varieties of English imported by settlers from Great Britain and be reinforced by the inherent ambiguity of *after*. Perfective meanings account for only a small proportion of overall usage.

Stage II (early 19th century): while use of *be after V-ing* in prospective senses remains strong, half of all occurrences are now perfect. The dramatic increase in perfective meanings, and the related decline in prospective readings, coincides with the large-scale shift from Irish Gaelic to English, so that the perfective meaning of the Gaelic construction with *tar éis* and the verbal noun may be asserting its dominance at this time.

Stage III (late 19th century): perfective connotations become more common as the use of *be after V-ing* in prospective senses continues to fall.

Stage IV (20th century): the construction virtually ceases to carry prospective meanings altogether, becoming almost exclusively perfective.

This study also shows the value of examining the existing record of written IE usage. Given sufficient material, especially for the crucial period of change in the nineteenth century, a development can be traced by which early prospective uses cease to be anomalous and become part of the story of Irish English.

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